

# Under the Guidance of the Dhamma

- Towards development and growth

*Professor Bhikkhu Dhammavihari*

If the Buddhist concept of dhamma [Skt. dharma] is truly and properly understood, we must emphatically say that it can be made to guide us in our lives. In my talk to you today, I propose to touch upon three specific areas. To the best of my ability, I would endeavour to make clear to you what the word dhamma means in the context of Buddhism. Then I would attempt a clarification of the concept of life. Please note that it would be less from a biological angle, now that we know so much about test-tube babies and frozen embryos, running in cold storage now for nearly five years. Humanity has mastered the art of keeping potential life in deep freeze, but these skills are seen to bring disaster in their wake. The Melbourne news paper THE AGE of Wednesday 24 July 1996 reported: ' More than 3300 embryos in deep freeze are set to be destroyed next Wednesday under a five-year freezing limit set by Britain's Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority unless the 900 parents they belong to contact the fertility clinics where they are stored. '

My observations would be more on how do we live after we have come into being, in what manner of relationship, in the midst of our fellow beings. And also what do we live for, as individuals or nations. What are our goals and targets? The third and the last point I would like to deal with is the concept of guidance. As humans living in this world with almost an unlimited range of freedom of speech and freedom of action, and with many other areas of freedom now being sought today by men, women and children, can we find a little allocation in our lives for a concept of guidance, a little slot for being guided? We do certainly need it, at least to the extent that motorists need the jurisdiction of a highway code while they drive their automobiles through the busy streets of the city. This they need in spite of being assuredly pretty good at the wheel. For us, it is the

life's highway code, derived from the realm of religion or spiritual growth, by whichever name you call it.

I know Cambodia was and is a Buddhist country and I am also fully aware that I am addressing a very nearly Buddhist audience. I crave your indulgence. For I do not mean to carry coal to Newcastle. Nevertheless, it is worth the attempt to retrieve our lost memories about the worth of dhamma in our lives. It has always indispensably served as a stabilizer in the history of mankind. Wherever humans achieved great heights and retained for any considerable length of time those achievements, it was because their civilizations were established on values which went a little further than their mere day to day material considerations of bread and butter and a grossly calculated affluence.

After more than twenty-five centuries of existence and use the word dhamma in Buddhism has come to acquire a prestigious position as a source of both comfort and inspiration. We shall explain and illustrate this as we go on. To begin with, it is a word of Indian origin and is widely used in Indian religious systems. In a very simplified sense it means a system of teaching, a doctrine or religious tradition. Its basic meaning is ' that which holds or supports, a supportive basis '.

The four stages of institutionalized life of the Indian was known as the Catur Asrama Dharma. They were the life of 1. the religiously apprenticed student called brahmacārin, 2. life as the lay householder tending a family or grhastha, 3. the world-renouncing forest-dweller or vānaprastha and 4. the totally retired sage or ascetic known as sanyāsin. India also had its system of instructions governing life in the human society, sometimes even with an unjustifiable rigidity which went under the name of Dharma Sāstra. These dominated the Indian society for hundreds of years. Some of these have been less palatable than others, a few at times being harshly discriminatory, and even inflicting social injustices on men and women, for reasons better known to themselves. With that petty and perverse character, it was obviously a misuse or abuse of the word dharma.

It were the Jainas, perhaps a little before the time of Buddha Gotama, who declared ' Respect for all forms of life is the highest dharma: Ahimsā paramo dharmah.' Buddha Gotama who appeared in India in the sixth century B.C. preached a dharma which, while elevating man - together with woman of course - to the highest transcendental levels, also reached the high-water mark of being a truly noble philosophy of life for mankind, here and now. It was again Buddha Gotama who declared that ' Universal love among men, without hatred and enmity, is the eternal law which brings peace on earth.' [Na hi verena verāni sammantī ' dha kudācanaṃ averena ca sammanti esa dhmmo sanantano. Dhp.].

Treat those around you as though they were not different from you. Do so on the very self-evident logical basis of the esteem and care in which you hold yourself. Hurt not another because you love yourself and you do not want to be hurt by another. The Buddha says to King Pasenadi of Kosala: ' Wherever one goes, east or west, one will never discover another who is dearer than oneself. To everyone his own self is dear. Therefore he who loves himself shall cause no injury to another ' [Sabbā disā anuparigamma cetasā nev ' ajjhagā piyataram attanā kvaci evaṃ piyo puthu attā paresaṃ tasmā na himse paraṃ attakāmo. Samyutta Nikaya].

Centuries before the institution of the charter of Fundamental Human Rights, incorporating respect for life and the right to live without threats or fear, the Buddha clearly laid it down that ' all living beings dread death and destruction and that life is dear to all that live' [Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa sabbesam jīvitam piyaṃ]. Remember, he said, what is true to you is true to all. Therefore one could not possibly take away the life of another. Such a concept of dharma must be admitted to be truly magnanimous. It certainly makes demands on our arrogance and our self-centeredness, individually and collectively. One has to loosen up a little bit of one's rigid cast-iron frames of national and religious, political and ethnic identities and the over-inflated notions of superiority which are menacing the world today from end to end.

Ours is also a dharma which enriches life beyond this, believe it or not. But Buddhism prescribes for success and happiness beyond only by carefully looking after and guarding man's achievements here. Propriety and rectitude in man's dealings in the world in which he lives, here and now, is what generates genuine bliss anywhere. The failure to keep the five precepts of pañca-sīla [of respecting life, of respecting others' right to ownership of property etc.] is in itself said to bring about the catastrophic downfall of a man in this very life [Idh ' eva eso lokasmim mūlaṃ khaṇati attano. Dhammapada]. It is the very anti-social behaviour of man, man's inability to live harmoniously with his fellow beings, without any reference whatsoever to an awe-inspiring concept of divinity who claims to hold sway over us completely from outside, which is said to underlie man's ruination here in this very life. It is self-wrought. Blame no other, is the rule in Buddhism.

Buddhist teachings tell us that he who lives in accordance with the dhamma secures for himself happiness here and hereafter. In the very words the Buddha used it runs like this: Dhamma-cārī sukhaṃ seti asmiiṃ loke paramhi ca. [Dhammapada]. Personal security for oneself is acquired through the way one behaves towards others, i.e. behaves in conformity with the dhamma which means within respected social norms [Dhammo have rakkhati dhamma-cāriṃ. Dhp.]. A life lived within this frame-work of dhamma, i.e. incorporating respect for life, respect for others' right of ownership to property, respect for propriety of sex relations between men and women etc., generates no distrust at any level in society, in the home or at national and international levels.

According to Buddhist teachings, one arrives at such a state of society where peace and harmony prevails and security of life and property is guaranteed from two specific angles. The first is individual and personal rectitude where people are governed from within, through their own judgement. For goodness in the world, they insist on the presence of two world-governing virtues or loka-pālaka-dhammā. They are hirī and ottappa, i.e. a sense of shame and a sense of fear

which guard us against doing anything wrong in our dealings with the rest of our society. We must remember these include our men and women, our children and our elders, those who work for us and those who go even further to guide our lives like our teachers and our clergy who nurture our spiritual growth. We must have our norms which regulate our behaviour towards them.

As elders we must be aware of our parental responsibilities of providing trustworthy and lovable guidance to our younger [thus reducing problems of juvenile delinquency in the society at large], as employers our obligation for recognition of the volume and quality of work done and to make adequate payment for services rendered by the working classes [thus eliminating the need for labour tribunals to redress grievances]. Also as the younger in society we must possess an awareness of our duty towards the care and protection of the elders in our society [thus reducing the burden on help-age institutions and the painfully crowded homes for the aged.]. Where a neglect of these is felt, an adequately powerful shock through a sense of shame and fear must be imparted to those who are guilty of it in order to rectify such maladies. These situations are adequately indicated and illustrated in Buddhist teachings. Collective social alertness for detection of such neglect and enough courage for prompt prosecution without prejudice or partiality are the crying need of the day, everywhere in the world. Very often it is seen that most people turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to these, oblivious to their devastating consequences. The result is that we miss in the world today the father or mother models which children can be made to emulate.

All these attitudes and consequent social action which must necessarily follow should freely flow without interruption for mutual benefit of every member of society. This alone will contribute for the harmonious and efficient functioning of the social machinery of any country. Whatever success that is achieved in this area at the more or less basic domestic level should both be recognized and backed and supported at state level. This could be effectively harnessed to form

a very reliable basis for law enforcement in any society. This is particularly so in areas of drug and sex offences where human commodity is dominantly involved.

On the other hand, Buddhism expects those at the head of states to be fully aware of their obligation to protect and safeguard their subjects. A dutiful king or ruler is called upon to provide this. The lives of all grades of humans, engaged and employed in different capacities of service to the land are to be protected. These include those engaged in the government of the country, the specially trained military personnel as well as the civilians. Mention is also made of the security of the lives of birds and beasts. Today, it is as if states are throwing up their arms in despair, in the face of worldwide terrorism and sabotage, unable to cope with this problem of security within one's own state, leave alone the problem of inter-state security. Almost everywhere, there seems to be far too much division within states, on the basis of religious and ethnic identities, even on account of subtle differences of political ideologies, stirred up by activist and even less activist groups.

Having talked even in a preliminary way about a universally applicable just philosophy wherein diverse components of the human community are treated with respect and recognition as a total brotherhood, without prejudice arising out of ethnicity, religious convictions or political leanings, let us now move in the direction of an anticipated growth and development for any specified segment of that community marked out on the basis region of settlement or any other. For successful and comparably matchable decent standards of living in any part of the world east or west, developed or less developed, there must be the basic wherewithal of food, clothing, shelter and medical care. There is no denying that these are admittedly basic.

If a sophisticated political philosophy of haves and have-nots is to be upheld universally with any measure of respect, it must also be widely accepted that there must be a reasonable free flow of these basics from where they are abundantly available to regions where they are sorely needed. Centuries of world

history has proved to us that this approach alone, and not vociferous claims of superiority for group political philosophies, whether they be of the east or the west, of the north or the south, provides the answer for world-wide problems of poverty and starvation, malnutrition and disease. On a sound economic principle of supply and demand, it is a world-wide provision of these needs at reasonable cost, no matter through which world organization, that matters much more than competitive marketing of political philosophies and paper-worked economic principles which are selfishly worked out for personal gain at national and international levels, both of individual and of groups. It is not untrue that this applies everywhere from the provision of daily bread for the home to supply of narcotics and drugs to the world market.

It is here that we need to talk of economic development for countries which are correctly or incorrectly labelled undeveloped, under-developed or developing. Communication media, with today's most sophisticated electronic type, networks of international air traffic in spite of catastrophic disasters of very high magnitude, have linked up the world together, time wise and space wise. Which did better, whether it is these media in their successful gathering together of a witches' brew as in Shakespeare's Macbeth or like the Berlin Wall which cut up Germany in two, we do not need to comment here right now.

We strongly feel that nations of the world, large and small, in allowing themselves to be caught up internationally in this kind of tornado-like movements of imitation and emulation have virtually plagued mankind. Everywhere it has now become a market economy of buying and selling. Labour in the area of production and worldwide markets in the area of selling strike a high note today. Even political conquests and semi-colonial adventures are motivated on these lines. All forms of media, printed material and the radio and television, all play to the gallery of consumerism. Whether these serve the world well or ill, is not even questioned. Those who must do the thinking are more than adequately drugged. To use another idiom, they are sterilized and incapacitated. At the level of the

home, these trade organizations make people believe that the sky is the limit in prestigious spending and gluttonous acquisition.

We must get out of this global turmoil. Economic development must be primarily diversified. Wherever possible, in terms of regional and cultural differences, it must acquire a meaningful domestic relevance. Quite often, a foreign investor's super-imposed industrial policy would have to give way to a native agricultural one. Tracks and tracks of native forests need not be cut down and cleared, subtly serving the needs of timber merchants, to grow wheat in a land where consumption wise it is totally alien. Even if it were not in terms of incoming dollars, the people of a country would be a great deal more rewarded in terms of good health, culturally compatible living habits as well as social harmony and integrity. Imported social models, including architecture and town and country planning, invariably lead to catastrophic social disintegration.

In terms of Buddhist thinking, economic development, side by side with social and cultural growth must come about in consonance with the aspirations of the people for whom they are meant. There must be an alignment with regional location, climatic compatibility and even with the centuries old cultural identities. Bull-dozers which are products of the new industrial age should not be given unlimited access to run over them and tear them apart. We pray for this degree of sanity and sobriety and the emergence of a native genius accompanied by people's own spiritual uplift.

Bhikkhu Professor Dhammavihari  
Buddhist Society of Victoria  
71-73 Darling Road East Malvern  
Victoria 3145  
Australia